

# Exploring the Macabre, Malevolent, and Mysterious



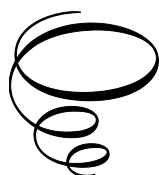
# Exploring the Macabre, Malevolent, and Mysterious:

*Multidisciplinary Perspectives*

Edited by

Matthew Hodge and Elizabeth Kusko

**Cambridge**  
**Scholars**  
Publishing



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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-5769-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-5769-7

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## PREFACE

In October of 2019, William Peace University hosted its 2019 Peace Interdisciplinary Conference (abbreviated to PEACEIC 2019). This two-day conference, themed as *Exploring the Macabre, Malevolent, and Mysterious*, invited scholarly presentations and academic discourse on the cultural fascinations with horror. The success of the conference subsequently led to this book, which aims to advance the intellectual exploration and interdisciplinary understanding of the topic of horror and cultural fascinations with subject matter often considered *dark*.

In this unique volume, a collection of scholars—spanning diverse areas and backgrounds such as Anthropology, English, Film, Foreign Languages, History, International Studies, Music, Political Science, Religion, Theatre, Social Work, and Videogames—offers fresh insight into how perceived concepts of horror and darkness influence our daily endeavors. Through these compiled academic chapters, one comes to comprehend that the macabre, malevolent, and mysterious are found not only in works of fiction and entertainment, but also in our cultural fabrics, our belief systems, our artistic creations, and even in our governmental structures.

As the academic study of horror becomes more mainstream, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collections such as this are instrumental in realizing just how much it impacts our lives—past, present, future, and imaginary. Thus, this volume of fascinating and profound topics offers a much needed fresh and innovative intellectual exploration of the horror genre and the cultural fascination of the mysterious unknown. The target audience for this book includes academic scholars, students, and any general reader who seek a more in-depth understanding of the presence and influences of the macabre, malevolent, and mysterious in our past and present societies.

This book divides its 12 chapters equally into four parts: History and Culture, Belief Systems and Experiences, Literature, and Entertainment Media. Brief descriptions of each of the chapters are as follows:

### **Part One: History and Culture**

Chapter 1 explores the ever-evolving Japanese culture and its relationship with the supernatural. This exploration navigates the influence of Japan's

deeply-rooted traditions on contemporary marketing of monsters and macabre-themed entertainment for modern consumers, creating a continually shifting exchange between tradition and modernity that is both clashing and complimentary.

Chapter 2 investigates the extensive history of specific nightshade plants and their relationships with cultural and societal practices and events. This investigation gives specific focus on their significant roles in three historic narratives shrouded in mystery and controversy: medieval European witchcraft, contemporary Haitian voodoo practices, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century American criminal investigations and international espionage.

Chapter 3 illuminates the importance of cemeteries in society. Despite being frequently perceived as macabre and mysterious places for the dead, this chapter argues the informative and even enjoyable aspects that cemeteries potentially hold for the living. These discussions address the significance of cemeteries in American culture and offer unique stories of three historic cemeteries in Raleigh, North Carolina, as examples of these significances.

## **Part Two: Belief Systems and Experiences**

Chapter 4 explores the interpretation of traditional music theory within contemporary Wicca spellcrafting. This exploration includes a thorough review of the music theory system published in the 2014 book *The Goodley Spellbook: Olde Spells for Modern Problems*, co-authored by Wicca Priest Steve Rasmussen. This analysis of Rasmussen's system—claimed to be the first publishing of an overtly “magical” music theory system—is supported by the transcription of Rasmussen's first formal interview regarding his “magical” music theory (conducted by this chapter's author).

Chapter 5 presents the dramatic and tragic biographies of the Fox Sisters, the founders of modern Spiritualism. This narrative exploration details the sisters' rise to immense following and popularity through their subsequent downfall into damaging exploitation, abject poverty, and shocking confessions. These biographical discussions provide insight into how new religious movements are developed, challenged, and preserved.

Chapter 6 studies the multilayered benefits of the sublime as a transcendental experience. Furthermore, this exploration approaches interdisciplinary perspectives of music, technology, and education as means to demonstrate the value of the sublime as an illuminating bridge connecting the desired academic STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).

### Part Three: Literature

Chapter 7 discusses Shirley Jackson's famous short story "The Lottery" and its exemplification of the controversial concept of the banality of evil presented in Hannah Arendt's series "Eichmann in Jerusalem." Both Jackson's story and Arendt's series were originally published in *The New Yorker Magazine*, providing an initial connection between these two writings. This chapter argues that further connections present themselves when Arendt's banality of evil is applied as the most promising interpretation of Jackson's tale and reasoning for its lasting significance.

Chapter 8 examines Stephen King's use of fragmentary narration in his famous novel *It*. This examination details how King's writing serves as postmodern metafiction while exploring the impacts of generational trauma through a dual narrative. Further discussions deepen interpretations of the novel as a greater documentation of American norms, collective remembering, and collective forgetting.

Chapter 9 offers a close reading of Al Columbia's graphic fiction *Pim and Francie* and provides thoughtful elaborations on the work's narrative fragmentation. These discussions explore the book's self-aware fragmentary state, the ways this fragmentation compels reader participation in the narrative process, and how Columbia's fractured work tears at the primary functions of the "sequential art" medium.

### Part Four: Entertainment Media

Chapter 10 assesses the absence of major American motion picture adaptations of Bram Stoker's gothic horror novel *Dracula* in recent decades. Despite the prevalence of vampire depictions – including characters named Dracula – in pop culture entertainment, no direct adaptations of Stoker's novel have appeared in major cinema since the early 1990s. This chapter's assessment investigates the quarter-century span of the popular vampire myth without a central Dracula character and how this cultural shift impacts an entire generation who grew up without a filmic Dracula.

Chapter 11 illuminates Hollywood's exploitation of mental illness as a scare tactic for audiences, with specific attention paid to depictions of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. These discussions offer insight into how the horror genre demonizes cognitive decline by playing on audiences' "fears of forgetting" and argues the cultural stigmas that exist as a byproduct of these horrific depictions of mental deterioration.

Chapter 12 places Sigmund Freud's concept of the "uncanny" within the contextual experience of the videogame *Heavy Rain*. This chapter analyzes

the game and its criminal protagonist – a serial killer who follows a highly personalized system—as exemplifying the uncanny. This analysis is supported through a central argument revolving around the performative aspects and artistic representations of crime that are enjoyed by players, observing the videogame through a Freudian perspective.

### **In Gratitude**

The editors of this book wish to express their sincere appreciation for all of the contributing authors whose chapters comprise this volume. They are also grateful to Adam Rummens, their corresponding editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Further appreciation goes towards Justin Johnson, the colleague and artist who designed the cover art. Finally, the editors wish to thank William Peace University and its administration for all of the valuable support shown for the 2019 Peace Interdisciplinary Conference and this subsequent book.

**PART ONE:**  
**HISTORY AND CULTURE**

CHAPTER ONE

MODERNIZING AND MARKETING  
MONSTERS IN JAPAN:  
SHAPESHIFTING YŌKAI  
AND THE REFLECTION OF CULTURE

KENDRA N. SHEEHAN

**Abstract:** From Pokémon to horror films, the Japanese have consistently used aspects of their culture to shape-shift the mundane into the supernatural, rebrand their monsters for entertainment, turn the uncanny into *kawaii* (cute), and market their macabre into a cultural phenomenon that is consumed worldwide. For a country whose culture is so deeply rooted in the traditional, Japan's relationship with the supernatural is continuously redefining itself, thus, creating a constantly shifting exchange between tradition and modernity. At times, tradition and modernity clash, but through capitalistic endeavors, tradition becomes a product of a modern consumer society. The role of the yōkai, sometimes translated as monsters or demons or ghosts, presents an interesting look at cultural ideas, themes, and societal elements within the country. Examining yōkai in Japan offers insight into the current historical and cultural contexts of Japanese society. Additionally, analyzing popular culture and yōkai presents the interchange and intersections of the traditional and the modern. This chapter proposes perspectives on the ways that yōkai have shifted from creatures lurking in the shadows to cute mascots selling products to consumers, as well as explores the global aspect of this phenomenon and its influence in the West, especially the United States.

**Keywords:** *Pokémon*; *Digimon*; *Yo-Kai Watch*; capitalism; supernatural; Migeru Shizuki; horror cinema; consumerism; *yuru kyara*

## Introduction

Popular culture is a significant lens with which to examine the values, morals, trends, and so on within particular cultures. For instance, one only

need to watch an episode of a television sitcom or a movie and see references to the historical and cultural contexts of the contemporaneous time the work was created. The use of popular culture and media to speak to audiences or highlight significant social movements within a culture is not a new concept. Greek playwrights, such as Sophocles and Aristophanes, critiqued figures and historical events in their plays. Although these plays would have been well received and performed during the Festival of Dionysus, one could assume that the items sold and consumed during the festival were not associated with the playwrights, rather the mythological figures in their plays and to whom the plays were dedicated. As earlier noted, using aspects of culture and media is not new, nor is it using those aspects for some financial gain. In Japan, popular culture uses elements from the country's deeply rooted cultural traditions, theatre, visual arts, and literary culture to inform various forms of media and consumer products. As a consumer culture, it should come as no surprise that contemporary Japanese media highlights the aspects of consumerism and capitalism within the country today. Comparable to the other examples mentioned, Japanese popular culture's use of these elements not only makes references to historical and cultural contexts but additionally illustrates how those elements have shifted over time.

A popular staple of Japanese popular culture that has shifted in its depictions, reflections of society, and which has significant historical antecedents, is the use of *yōkai*. The term “*yōkai*” is a bit of an umbrella term referring to the ghosts, monsters, and demons that inhabit the otherworldly landscape of Japanese ghost stories and mythology. Therefore, it is no secret that “*yōkai* provide insight into the ways humans, at different historical moments and in different circumstances, choose to interpret the world around them.”<sup>1</sup> The current use of *yōkai* in popular culture speaks to the consumption, consumerism, and capitalism of Japan; this is primarily found in the worldwide phenomenon and success of *Pokémon*, as well as other *yōkai*-inspired franchises, such as *Yo-Kai Watch* and *Digimon*.

## **Yōkai: Overview, Influences, and Shifting Perspectives**

To best understand the significance of *yōkai*, the use of the term, and how they are understood needs to be succinctly identified. The word *yōkai* is written with the kanji 妖 read as *yō* and 怪 read as *kai*, which Zack Davisson translates as “something that is otherworldly and strange yet captivating and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 22.

appealing.”<sup>2</sup> The actual use of the word *yōkai* dates back as far as the eighth century, where it is noted in the *Shoku Nihongi* and has roots in China, however, the everyday use of the word is recent.<sup>3</sup> The current use of *yōkai* is credited as initially being a “catchall word” in the writing of Kunio Yanagita, the folklorist credited with expanding the study of *yōkai* in the early twentieth century, and combined with the use of the term by comic book artist Shigeru Mizuki.<sup>4</sup> *Yōkai* often refers to the various entities that embody elements of nature, animals, and aspects of everyday life. Sometimes they represent animal-like beasts, or they are humanoid in shape. They exist in a liminal space between untamed nature and civil society but can move freely between all spaces. The *yōkai* are creatures who like to prank and sometimes devour the humans who fear them. Ultimately, the *yōkai* appear as creatures who embody the uncanny. The idea of fantastical creatures has captured the imagination of the Japanese for quite some time. While a full history of the *yōkai* is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief overview of the history and influences is warranted to understand the early popularity of the *yōkai*.

Early images of *yōkai* graced various *emakimono*, or hand-painted scrolls, such as the *Hyakki Yagyō Zu* and the *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* from the Muromachi period (1336-1573 CE). Both scrolls depict the various *yōkai* in the *Hyakki Yagyō*, or *the Night Parade of One Hundred Demons*. The story of the hundred *yōkai* on parade dates back as early as the ninth century, referenced in a tale from the *Konjaku Monogatari*.<sup>5</sup> The *Hyakki Yagyō* was an idiom in Japanese folklore, and many artists and storytellers capitalized on the popularity of *yōkai*, depicting them in visual art, such as the previously mentioned *emakimono*, and later in *ukiyo-e*, or woodblock prints.<sup>6</sup> Thus, *yōkai* were prevalent subjects in ghost stories, among things to be studied and categorized during the Edo period (c. 1600-1868 CE). One such example of this categorization, and collection, were the illustrated books known as the *Gazu Hyakkiyagyō* by Sekien Toriyama in the eighteenth century. Toriyama’s books gave information on the *yōkai*, and his work would go on to inspire others such as comic artist and *yōkai*

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<sup>2</sup> Zack Davisson, “What Does Yokai Mean in English?”, 百物語怪談会 Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai, last modified October 25, 2012, <https://hyakumonogatari.com/2012/10/26/what-does-yokai-mean-in-english/>.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Lillehoj, “Transfiguration: Man-Made Objects as Demons in Japanese Scrolls,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 54, no.1 (1995), 16-18, JSTOR.

<sup>6</sup> Lillehoj, “Transfiguration: Man-Made Objects as Demons in Japanese Scrolls,” 7-34.



specialist Shigeru Mizuki. Suffice to say, *yōkai* have seemingly always captured the imagination of the Japanese.

Today, numerous *yōkai* grace popular culture products, such as cartoons, comics, and toys, among others, as they highlight shifts and trends throughout Japan's history. For instance, the role of *yōkai*, such as the *tengu*, points to the many ways that these figures have shifted throughout time. The *tengu* are depicted as humanoid creatures with wings, and either a bird's beak or a human face with a long nose. In Medieval Japan, the *tengu* fluctuated between being symbols of evil sent to disrupt Buddhism to becoming heroes and protectors of Buddhism. They reflected the conflict between the various Buddhist schools of medieval Japan.<sup>7</sup> Today, *tengu* are often depicted in video games as a number of various enemies that must be defeated to achieve an objective such as those in *Muramasa the Demon Blade*; or they appear as allies who guide protagonists as seen in the anime and manga series *Ushio and Tora*. Outside of popular culture products, *tengu* still maintain historical associations with and links to various religious sites within Japan. The image of the *tengu* is commonly featured on products, such as Tengumai sake, or as a stylized icon for the restaurant-bars aptly *Tengu*.<sup>8</sup> Contemporaneously, the *tengu* no longer represents conflicts between Buddhist schools; instead, they represent and reflect "roles in local community life, religion, tourism, and commerce."<sup>9</sup> The *tengu* shapeshifts to reflect its role within a culture that holds to tradition and continues to try to reconcile it with the present.

Another example of a *yōkai* that notably shifted over time is the *oni*, whose earliest depictions were varied. The figure of the *oni* was initially associated with elements of Buddhism and syncretized with aspects of Hindu-Buddhist cannibals such as the *yasha* or *rasetsu*.<sup>10</sup> The *Jigoku zōshi*, or *Hell Scrolls*, from the late-twelfth-century, contain the earliest depiction of the *oni* in visual art.<sup>11</sup> In these scrolls, the *oni* torture sinners in many ways, such as dismembering them on cutting boards, in the various levels of Buddhist Hell.<sup>12</sup> Aside from their role as wardens of Hell, *oni* represent or

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<sup>7</sup> Haruko Wakabayashi, "Monks, Sovereigns, and Malign Spirits: Profiles of Tengu in Medieval Japan," *Religion Compass* 7, no.7 (2013): 234-242.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 138.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Noriko T. Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Osterfield Li, "Human of the Heart: Pitiful Oni in Medieval Japan," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, edited by Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle, (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 177-178.

<sup>12</sup> Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 39.

reflect ideas of cannibalism, figures of transformation, disenfranchisement of those beyond the Emperor's control, representing customs of metal or mine workers in the Oē Mountains, associations with lightning, as bringers of wealth, and representative of foreign enemies.<sup>13</sup> The most common depictions of *oni* include wearing tiger-skin loincloths and “as large, powerful, frightening, humanlike male figures with red, blue, black, or yellow faces, clawed hands, and sharp, protruding fangs.”<sup>14</sup> While these are standard for most depictions of *oni*, in the late seventies to early eighties, *oni* were being depicted in a different way. In a drastic departure from their more horrifying origins, Rumiko Takahashi's 1978 comic *Urusei Yatsura* features the *oni* becomes a sexy space alien. One of the main characters and *oni* Lum is depicted as a cute younger woman who has sex appeal, as evidenced by her tiger-skin bikini and voluptuous form.<sup>15</sup> In the *Touhou Project* video game series, one of the villains, Suika Ibuki, is an *oni* who is illustrated as a cute young girl wearing a tattered Lolita-style dress. Shifts from horrifying figures in folk tales and traditions, the *oni* are now commonly found in numerous forms of Japanese popular culture.

One final example of a *yōkai* figure that has shifted over time is the *tanuki*, or raccoon dog. These master shapeshifters reflect anxieties about modernity and its impact on geographical and cultural landscapes. During the Edo period, *tanuki* were depicted as inept shapeshifters for comical effect, and they “intersected dynamically with popular cultural concerns, veiled political sentiments, and commercial and artistic interests in” *kibyōshi*, which were picture books with a yellow cover for adults.<sup>16</sup> Rapid modernization in Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912 CE) resulted in the steam train becoming symbolic of the linking of modernity and the nation. In this period, the *tanuki* was used to portray ambivalence about Japan's rapid modernization, on top of being used to illustrate the loss or changing of the natural environment and tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the anime film *Pom Poko* (1994) depicted, as well as lamenting the loss of Japan's natural environments due to expansion and construction. The *tanuki* of *Pom Poko* attempt to stop construction and further loss of their home by returning to their traditions of shapeshifting

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<sup>13</sup> Noriko T. Reider, “Transformation of the Oni: From the Frightening and Diabolical to the Cute and Sexy,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 62, no.1 (2003), 135, 136, 138, 141, 142, 147.

<sup>14</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Reider, “Transformation of the Oni,” 150.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Dylan Foster, “Haunting Modernity: Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan,” *Asian Ethnology* 71 (March 2012), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Foster, “Haunting Modernity,” 12.

and scaring humans. Several of the *tanuki* give up the fight against the humans and assimilate into society by transforming into humans. More recent depictions of the *tanuki*, often depict them as cute or eccentric figures, like Tanukichi, or Tom Nook in the English localization, from the video game *Animal Crossing*.

The yōkai's ability to reflect shifts within culture points to the fact that yōkai can be many things, notably paradoxical. They can be benevolent and bestow luck upon the humans they encounter, or they can be wicked and bring calamity. Some yōkai are merely mischievous shapeshifters who enjoy playing pranks on unsuspecting humans, while others are of a more malicious nature. As such, depending on the region, there can be variations of tales where the most common and popularly known yōkai that are not typically malignant become murderous. One such example is the shapeshifting *tanuki* in "Kachi-kachi yama" ("Crackling-fire Mountain"), which depicts the yōkai taking the form of a woman he kills and then cooks in a soup that is given to her husband.<sup>18</sup> One other example of a yōkai that can be depicted as generous or evil is the *Yamauba*, or Mountain Witch. In one particular tale collected in Keigo Seki's *Folktales of Japan*, the *Yamauba* tricks three children into letting her into their house while their mother is away and devours the youngest child.<sup>19</sup> Humorous, didactic, and horrifying tales were collected throughout the Edo period, capturing the various versions of yōkai, and allowing for the collection as well as the commodification of the monstrous.

As the popularity of yōkai slowed during the Meiji period, due to the country focusing on modernization and rejection of things that could be deemed "backward," yōkai rose to prominence as a subject once again in the time after World War II. In the period following the defeat of Japan and the Allied Occupation (1946-1952 CE), comics and film used yōkai to critique and navigate a postwar Japan and consciousness. One such work was the manga, or Japanese comic, *Gegege no Kitarō* created in 1960 by Shigeru Mizuki. The manga examines the yōkai as peaceful yet mischievous while depicting humans as those who could resemble the monsters that yōkai were supposed to be. Mizuki, who considered himself a scholar of yōkai, is credited with influencing contemporary views and depictions of yōkai. Undoubtedly, Mizuki's influence is parallel to the way Clement Clarke Moore influenced the modern view of Santa Claus.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 188.

<sup>19</sup> Keigo Seki, *Folktales of Japan*, trans. Robert J. Adams, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 54-57.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Lombardi, "Shigeru Mizuki, the Legendary Manga Creator and 'Yokai Professor,' Finally Gets His Due," Syfy Wire, last modified January 7, 2019,

## Impact of Mizuki Shigeru

Mizuki is among the most significant scholars, along with being the creator of modern yōkai. In addition to influencing the contemporary depictions and understanding of yōkai in Japan, Mizuki was influential on Japanese popular culture in general.<sup>21</sup> Drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army in 1942, Mizuki had grown up an artistic prodigy but was deeply impacted by his time in the army. His left and dominant arm was lost during an Allied air raid in Papua New Guinea, and he was the only one from his unit to survive.<sup>22</sup> The war impacted Mizuki's work and pacifism, and the yōkai that inhabit his creative landscapes appear only during peaceful times, not times of war.<sup>23</sup> Mizuki's manga typically depicted yōkai that were influenced by oral and written forms of traditional folklore. Although he used yōkai that many Japanese were familiar with, Mizuki additionally used obscure yōkai and was not above creating his own. One example of a yōkai created by Mizuki was *Nezumi Otoko*, who was a greedy yōkai reflecting the greed of Japan during the country's period of high economic growth.<sup>24</sup>

Mizuki's *Gegege no Kitarō*, originating as a manga, was first animated in 1968 and has had six other animated series since, two live-action films, an animated film, and numerous video games. The success of Mizuki, along with the impact and popularity of *Gegege no Kitarō*, resulted in the creation of the "Mizuki Shigeru Road," also known as "Tottori Yōkai Road," in Mizuki's hometown of Sakaiminato.<sup>25</sup> There are one hundred bronze statues of yōkai featured in *Gegege no Kitarō* featured throughout the town. The yōkai are featured in various promotional ads encouraging tourism, and Mizuki himself becomes a marketable product featured in a bronze statue alongside his own creations and creatures of folklore.

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<https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/shigeru-mizuki-the-legendary-manga-creator-and-yokai-professor-finally-gets-his-due>.

<sup>21</sup> Zack Davisson, "The Life and Death of Shigeru Mizuki, 1922-2015," *The Comics Journal*, last modified December 9, 2015, <http://www.tcj.com/the-life-and-death-of-shigeru-mizuki>.

<sup>22</sup> Tomoko Otake, "Drawing on Experience," *The Japan Times*, last modified February 6, 2005,

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2005/02/06/to-be-sorted/drawing-on-experience-2/#.XLS8apNKiRs>.

<sup>23</sup> NHK, "Remembering a Manga Master," *NHK World*, last modified December 1, 2015, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/editors/6/20151201/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> NHK, "Remembering a Manga Master."

<sup>25</sup> "Mizuki Shigeru Road," Tottori Prefectural Government Tourism and Exchange Bureau Tourism Strategy Division, accessed January 13, 2020, <https://www.tottori-tour.jp/en/sightseeing/835/>.

Mizuki was heavily influenced by the work of Kunio Yanagita, a folklorist who had documented *yōkai* “as relics from a disappearing Japan.”<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, Mizuki used ideas of nostalgia and life from pre-WWII Japan to transform *yōkai* into “the concrete.”<sup>27</sup> Much like Yanagita and other folklorists before him, Mizuki was also a scholar of *yōkai*, documenting and cataloging them in a manner reminiscent of the same catalogs from the Edo period.<sup>28</sup> Mizuki’s creation and use of *yōkai* locate him in a particular, almost liminal space where he used *yōkai* for commercial gain, as a possible form of catharsis to cope with his wartime experiences, and as a scholar.

In the nineties, Mizuki’s popularity rose due to a growing interest in psychic phenomena, which resulted in various essays and books examining Japanese folklore and beliefs.<sup>29</sup> His works would go on to inspire *Pokémon*, a series about a young boy and his *yōkai*-inspired companion. The boy, named Satoshi in the original Japanese version and Ash Ketchum in the West, undertakes a journey to capture other *Pokémon* and to be the best *Pokémon* trainer with the help of his electrical empowered and rodent-like companion named Pikachu. Mizuki’s vision of *yōkai* as naturally mischievous, but peaceful companions, would be reflected in the various creatures and characters that Satoshi/Ash and Pikachu would encounter in their journeys.

## **Yōkai in Popular Culture as Evidenced in Video Games**

It is no secret that *Pokémon* is one of the most successful franchises to come out of Japan in the late nineties. Kids in Japan and the United States, and across the rest of the globe were paying for and playing with any number of products emblazoned with Pikachu or one of his fellow *Pokémon* on it. *Pokémon* is a concrete example of the shapeshifting that the figure of the *yōkai* has undergone due to the modernizing, marketing, and capitalizing of *yōkai*. Numerous television series, movies, product tie-ins with fast-food chains, comics, video games, and a trading card game are just a few of the ways that *Pokémon* reached its consumers. For the sake of brevity, only the video game and its reflection of contemporary Japan will be examined.

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<sup>26</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Frederik L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2011), 182.

Pokémon are creatures that have powers and abilities such as those often linked to gods, deities, and powerful supernatural beings. They can harness the elements like the deities or spirits, known as *kami*, from Shinto, a Japanese religion, or some can eat the dreams and nightmares of humans akin to the *baku*, a dream eating yōkai from Japanese lore. In *Pokémon*, characters are concerned with using these yōkai inspired creatures as collectibles – sure, they are creatures that can be befriended, although they are conjointly used to fight others and to solve issues in their everyday life in a Flintstones-esque manner. The parallel to *the Flintstones* is that these creatures are used as tools to benefit their masters. Unlike the creatures in *the Flintstones* who were based on real animals, such as elephants and birds, Pokémon are based on powerful supernatural beings. The creatures in Pokémon, who are often inspired or influenced by godlike and monstrous beings from folklore, are wielded by the eleven-year-old protagonist and other characters. These characters make the Pokémon do as they please within the limits of the game, whether that is fighting other Pokémon or clearing a path to access a new area. This can be anything from the earlier mentioned fighting, use as a commodity, or for the mundane. In the 2018 release of the latest Pokémon games, *Let's Go! Pikachu* and *Let's Go! Eevee*, for the Nintendo Switch, the protagonist can come across an elderly man who is using his Pokémon to clear rocks and rubble.

Another example would be the Hidden Machines (HM) used to teach Pokémon moves that allow them to cut down small trees (HM01 Cut), transport the trainer by flying them to other locations (HM02 Fly), and moves that allow them to move boulders (HM04 Strength) among several other HMs that can be used for everyday tasks in the series' environments. Hidden Machines change depending on the Pokémon game's world. For instance, in the games, *Pokémon Red/Blue*, *Pokémon Gold/Silver*, and *Pokémon Crystal* among several others, the HMs in the Kanto region, are HM01 Cut, HM02 Fly, HM03 Surf, HM04 Strength, and HM05 Flash.

Besides the use of Pokémon for various tasks in the games, animated films, and overall series, they provide the audience with the ability to interact in the world of Pokémon. The Pokémon require interactivity on the part of the audience because they are “active things, things that encourage some sort of investment on the part of the audience, not just time or money, but activities around collecting, battling, evolving and learning aspects of the Pokémon and their world.”<sup>30</sup> The franchise is about a protagonist who can befriend the creatures and who has good intentions and is about the

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<sup>30</sup> Jason Bainbridge, “‘Gotta Catch ‘Em All!’ Pokémon, Cultural Practice and Object Networks,” *The IAFOR Journal of Asian Studies* 1 (December 2014), 4.

commodification of these supernatural creatures. The country of Japan, much like other modern countries, is a capitalist society, concerned with consumerism and convenience.

The Pokémon themselves are arguably a form of capitalism and are conveniently transported in pokéballs, traded for other Pokémon with other players, or used for convenience. Anne Allison explains:

While the aim of the game is continual acquisition, the objects one ‘gets’ are both thingified (valued economically) and personalized (cute monsters inspiring affection, attachment, and love). The logic of play here involves a currency of shifting and multiple valences between spirits and profits, companions and capital, inalienable goods. Capitalism is thus equally mimicked and (re)constructed in the forms of play/consumption engaged by *Pokémon*. Even as it conforms to a preexisting market economy, *Pokémon* also pushes this economy in new directions—what I call here (only half facetiously) *Pokémon* capitalism. This is a millennial dreamworld of enchanting goods and virtual relations in which commodities double as gifts and companions. It is also an arena that features a borrowing and reinvention of a Japanese cultural past (gift exchange, supernatural spirits, otherworldly aestheticism). And with this comes the objective not only of selling goods and making profits but also of mapping Japan’s place in the world as the New Age synthesizer of old-style sensitivity and human relationships.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, *Pokémon* illustrates how Japan has grown as an economic power through its use of soft power and nevertheless points to Japan’s ability to capitalize on its traditions, which are then blended with modernity. The *Pokémon* franchise reiterates aspects of traditional Japanese culture and filters it through a modern lens into a world with which consumers are familiar. The past becomes modernized, and Japanese tradition continues to pass on to each generation of consumers.

The success of *Pokémon* symbolizes a reflection of Japanese national identity. Within the story and plot of the series, is “an ideological [tale] about Japan’s place in the world, tallied on the basis of a science devoted to playthings: a commentary on Japan’s rise to global prominence as a producer of (‘evolved’) kids’ goods.”<sup>32</sup> Then are the depictions of yōkai in anime, manga, video games, and other forms of multi-media representative of how they are interpreted today? Originally being associated with beloved kids’ goods in 1995, after celebrating the twentieth anniversary in 2016,

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<sup>31</sup> Anne Allison, “Pokémon: Getting Monsters and Communicating Capitalism,” in *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 197.

<sup>32</sup> Allison, “Pokémon: Getting Monsters and Communicating Capitalism,” 208.

*Pokémon* is for both kids and adults. Analogous to the way the *Star Wars* franchise has continued through expanding its fictional universe and using nostalgia, *Pokémon* has similarly used nostalgia and expansion to continue to reach new generations of consumers. Numerous commercials were depicting a parent and child bonding over their shared interests and the product. *Pokémon* and nostalgia are not the only ways that the figures of yōkai have continued to be marketed towards consumers. Since the success of *Pokémon* was globally recognized, other yōkai-inspired series have achieved parallel accomplishments, albeit not on the exact same level of *Pokémon*. Two specific series are *Digimon* and *Yo-Kai Watch*, which have spawned comics, cartoons, video games, and a variety of toys.

*Digimon* shares a parallel premise to *Pokémon* with a group of children befriending yōkai-like creatures whom they can train and battle with others. Products associated with *Digimon* included a number of video games, toys, clothing, and other products that were akin to the many products associated with *Pokémon*. Unlike *Pokémon*, however, the *Digimon* are not meant to be captured and collected. There is only one *Digimon* for the player or the characters in the anime and manga. The use of one yōkai-inspired being is in contrast to both the *Pokémon* and *Yo-Kai Watch* franchises. In further contrast to *Pokémon* and *Yo-Kai Watch*, *Digimon* features its respective creatures in a digital world, the fittingly named Digital World. The growth of home computers, cell phones, and access to the Internet has influenced the shifts and trends of yōkai as they are depicted in popular media. The Internet and technology have provided new realms and possibilities for yōkai to navigate in addition to use at their disposal.

Set in a world, not unlike the real world, the fundamental concept of *Yo-Kai Watch* centers around the idea of befriending Yo-kai the player or characters encounter. Yo-kai are based more obviously on traditional yōkai rather than just being inspired or influenced by them as the creatures found in *Pokémon* or *Digimon* are. Similar to *Pokémon*, Yo-kai can be summoned with a unique wristwatch to fight, perform everyday tasks, or to provide aid in befriending other Yo-kai. Despite *Yo-Kai Watch* achieving some success in the U.S., it did not maintain popularity due to the release of *Pokémon Go* for smartphones coupled with the release of *Pokémon Sun* and *Moon* for the Nintendo 3DS gaming system.

*Pokémon*, *Digimon*, and *Yo-Kai Watch* are all focused on aspects pertaining to the collection of knowledge that centers on the yōkai-like creatures of their respective worlds, not unlike the cataloging of yōkai during the Edo period. However, the difference is that the player of these games is the active participant and consumer. Trading cards, key chains, and various other pop products emblazoned with the cute yōkai-like



mascots of these series are encouraged to be purchased and consumed. The figures from these games become what Anne Allison explains that characters like Pikachu from *Pokémon* are “prosthetically personal” due to their portability and “not just a machine that is used and owned, but an intimate part of the self.”<sup>33</sup> So, yōkai have become marketed monsters and virtual companions for a digital age. Yōkai are a commodity that has been rebooted and rebranded as cute characters that double as a collectible and a companion with whom consumers can interact.

### Yōkai Reflections in Contemporary Japan

If one looks at franchises like *Pokémon*, yōkai appear to represent consumerism in a capitalist society and both the clashing of tradition and modernity. In his book, *The Book of Yōkai*, Michael Dylan Foster asserts that yōkai are a part of a structure he refers to as the “yōkai industrial complex, in which commercial producers draw on traditional yōkai imagery and historical background to create attractive yōkai-related goods.”<sup>34</sup> Foster goes on to explain that the yōkai industrial complex “provides a structure not only for creating products but also for promoting and selling them.”<sup>35</sup> One yōkai, *Tōfu-Kozō*, or Tofu Boy, originated in the latter part of the eighteenth century as a topical reference or an advertising mascot.<sup>36</sup> In essence, yōkai are mythical creatures representing tradition, being absorbed into a modern society that is rife with consumerism and capitalism. Furthermore, there is Cool Japan, an initiative that capitalizes on Japanese popular culture to promote Japanese culture in various ways.

Capitalizing on the idea of a “Cool Japan” is one way in which the country has attempted to improve economic conditions and the image of Japan around the globe. Using its popular culture, Japan has gained economic power as a soft power, using cultural allure rather than coercive might, hard power, to attract others to Japanese culture. Douglas McGray’s article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” highlighted the numerous ways in which Japan had grown as a superpower and pointed to Japan’s recession as having helped boost national cool in part due to rigid hierarchies and

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<sup>33</sup> Anne Allison, “The Cultural Politics of Pokemon Capitalism,” paper presented at Media in Transition 2: Globalization and Convergence, MIT, Cambridge, MA, May 2002, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 213.

lifetime employment no longer being viable structures in Japan.<sup>37</sup> Cool Japan has seen the rise of mascots in Japan, in regard to product placement, along with efforts to increase tourism in the cities and prefectures in the country.

These mascots in Japan, known as *yuru-kyara*, are found in cities, prefectures, and various organizations, among others. In Japan, it is not uncommon to make contractions of words. In this case, the full name of *yuru-kyara* characters is ゆるいマスコットキャラクター (*yurui masukotto kyarakutā*), or “light-hearted mascot character.” The first part of this name ゆるい (*yurui*), and can be translated numerous ways, such as “loose,” “gentle,” “weak,” “light-hearted,” or “unimportant.”<sup>38</sup> *Masukotto* is the Japanese pronunciation of mascot, while *kyara* is a shortening of *kyarakutā*, which refers to “character.” As noted, *yuru-kyara* are used for numerous purposes and are heavily used in promoting business and boosting tourism.<sup>39</sup> The inspirations and creation of *yuru-kyara* mascots vary from place to place within Japan. They can “include (but are not limited to) animals, local products, physical objects, and historical figures.”<sup>40</sup> Notably, *yuru-kyara* can be inspired by *yōkai*, who are often associated with various local legends or respective beliefs.<sup>41</sup> The concepts of *yuru kyara*, coupled with ideas of *kawaii*, or cute, aesthetics is then applied to *yōkai*, and a new mascot is created. Consequently, *yōkai* become a marketing tool to sell items and encourage tourism.

A couple of examples of *yuru kyara* are Kaparu, Saitama City’s mascot, and Takibou, the mascot of Shaolin Temple in Hachioji, Tokyo. Kaparu is based on the *kappa*, a *yōkai* that resembles a humanoid turtle with an indentation or saucer on its head, proclivity for cucumbers and mischief, and drowns its unsuspecting victims. This particular *yōkai* is both dangerous and playful, playing pranks on unsuspecting humans or drowning livestock and young children.<sup>42</sup> The other *yōkai*-inspired *yuru kyara*, Takibou is based on the *tanuki* and its relationship with Buddhism, particularly Buddhist monks. The *tanuki*, one of the most common *yōkai* along with the

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” *Foreign Policy* 130 (May 2002), 44-54.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Brasar, “The Obsession Over Those Dumbed Down Cute Mascots,” *The Japan Times*, last modified August 3, 2008, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/08/03/national/media-national/the-obsession-over-those-dumbed-down-cute-mascots/#.Xh8451NKiRt>.

<sup>39</sup> Brasar, “The Obsession Over Those Dumbed Down Cute Mascots.”

<sup>40</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 94.

<sup>42</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 137.

*kappa*. This yōkai is based on a real animal and is depicted “as somewhat bumbling and potbellied, with a penchant for drinking sake, changing shape, and impersonating Buddhist monks.”<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, as a mascot, Takibou is clearly a *tanuki* wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk. Though mascots in Japan are used to promote tourism, various associated products and goods are available to purchase, such as Takibou’s “Takibou Fragrance Cure Sunset” perfume.<sup>44</sup> The *yuru-kyara* and yōkai both represent and reflect specific peculiarities found within Japanese culture that continue to change and transform. As yōkai have become marketing tools, they have certainly played a role in the formation of Cool Japan and through franchises such as *Pokémon*. Consequently, the modernizing and marketing of yōkai continues to represent a constant shifting of paradigms between tradition and modernity.

## Yōkai and Horror Cinema in the West

Whilst yōkai have reached the West, and the rest of the globe, through the earlier mentioned franchises of *Pokémon*, Japanese horror films provide another lens with which to examine the cultural shifts and trends in Japan. Yōkai have been featured in early theater and cinema, and are continuing to appear in various forms of media. Considering the role of horror films in Japan is useful because, as Jay McRoy argues in *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*, “As a substantial component of Japanese popular culture, horror films allow artists an avenue through which they may apply visual and narrative metaphors in order to engage aesthetically with a rapidly transforming social and cultural landscape.”<sup>45</sup> Yōkai have been immensely popular since the Edo period (1600-1868 CE), when scary stories featuring yōkai or their spectral counterparts, the *yūrei*, were being told or featured in illustrations across Japan. Tales of ghosts and demons existed well before the start of the Edo period, yet it is during this time that the popularity of the yōkai grows. The macabre appears in various stories about *kitsune*, or foxes, who were shapeshifters taking the form of beautiful young women or the spirits of women wronged by men seeking revenge in the form of grotesque shapes such as Oiwa whose visage is transfigured into a lantern bearing her disfigured face in the numerous

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<sup>43</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 187.

<sup>44</sup> “The Smell of a Tanuki Monster Captured in a Perfume,” Japan Today, last modified December 27, 2012, <https://japantoday.com/category/features/the-smell-of-a-tanuki-monster-captured-in-a-perfume?comment-order=latest>.

<sup>45</sup> Jay McRoy, *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*, (New York: Rodopi, 2008), 4.

versions of the *Yotsuya Kaidan*. Kabuki plays, illustrated books, and summer ghost storytelling games became popular forms of entertainment. In the modern period, these ghost stories are updated for a contemporary audience, or elements are used to inform new tales of horror and the uncanny.

Although the actual figure of the *yōkai* has been transformed into a commodity that is cute and marketable, the *yūrei*, often linked to and sometimes considered a type of *yōkai*, has become a popular subject for film franchises. The *yūrei* is more of a ghost, with its own various subtypes such as the *onryō* or vengeful spirit. One needs to look no further than the *Ringu* or *Ju-On* film series. Both Sadako and Kayako, from *Ringu* and *Ju-On*, respectively, are two *yūrei* who appear together in the 2016 crossover film *Sadako vs. Kayako*. While one would not typically equate cuteness with ghosts seeking revenge on the living, the promotion for *Sadako vs. Kayako* incorporated aesthetics of cuteness, in a collaborative effort with Hello Kitty – the ultimate cute icon.<sup>46</sup> Social media accounts were created through Twitter and Instagram.<sup>47</sup> The ghosts from the film participated in the first pitch ceremony at a baseball game between the Nippon-Ham Fighters and the Yakult Swallows.<sup>48</sup> Both Sadako and Kayako, along with Toshio, the ghostly son of Kayako from *Ju-On*, appear in a series of promotional videos that teach movie theater etiquette in a tongue-in-cheek manner.<sup>49</sup> The once horrifying *yūrei* have become parodies to encourage and entertain moviegoers.

Whereas Sadako and Kayako are being found in various associations of cute within Japan, upon their arrival in the United States, they initially appeared as leading figures of horror. However, *Ringu* and *Ju-On* did not just appear as overnight successes in the West. The popularity of *Pokémon* and video games from Japan, such as the *Biohazard* and *Silent Hill* series,

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Chapman, “Hello Kitty and Friends Cosplay as Characters from ‘Sadako vs. Kayako,’” Crunchyroll, last modified May 27, 2016, <https://www.crunchyroll.com/anime-news/2016/05/27/hello-kitty-and-friends-cosplay-as-characters-from-sadako-vs-kayako>.

<sup>47</sup> Desmond Bieler, “Creepy First Pitch Features Characters from ‘The Ring’ and ‘The Grudge,’” The Washington Post, last modified June 5, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/06/05/creepy-first-pitch-features-characters-from-the-ring-and-the-grudge/>.

<sup>48</sup> Bieler, “Creepy First Pitch Features Characters from ‘The Ring’ and ‘The Grudge.’”

<sup>49</sup> Brad Miska, “‘Sadako vs. Kayako’ Promos Teach Theater Etiquette,” Bloody Disgusting, last modified May 1 2016, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/movie/3389437/sadako-vs-kayako-promos-teach-theater-etiquette/>.

helped create a path for Japanese cinema. Colette Balmain states in *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, these franchises, and popular culture products had a profound impact on Japan's economy, "with Japanese cultural exports tripling between 1993 and 2003, bringing in \$12.5 billion."<sup>50</sup> This helped pave "the way for the success of Japanese horror cinema in the West, which broke out of its cult status with the critical and commercial success of Hideo Nakata's *Ring* in 1998."<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

Culture, especially popular culture, not just in Japan, provides a liminal space that is rife with information that can be used by contemporary artists, writers, business people, and many more to use for their own gains. In contemporary culture, images and figures from horror have begun to highlight a shift in what was once considered the macabre, the horrific, and the uncanny. Now Western horror figures like Freddy Krueger have been rendered in a style that clearly takes influence from Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics known as *chibi*, which is a type of caricature that emphasizes cuteness. This Japanese aesthetic can be seen in the Funko Pop! Vinyl series of figures, of which Freddy Krueger can be found included among, and subsequent t-shirts and posters that have arisen from them. Yōkai and various Japanese aesthetics, through globalization and the worldwide recognition of Japanese popular culture, have reached well beyond the borders of the country.

Western horror media reflects influences and direct elements from yōkai, seen from the movie *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990) to the television series *The Terror: Infamy* (2019). Foster observes that "commercially businesses such as publishers, filmmakers, and toy companies are well aware of the profit potential of anything having to do with yōkai."<sup>52</sup> Even though Foster was referring specifically to Japan, his comments likewise resonate with Western businesses as well. Hence, the role of yōkai in current Japanese media and popular culture highlights another period of growth within and outside of Japan.

Rather than appearing for the sake of knowledge, tests of bravery, or just for entertainment, the yōkai are now products to be sold and manipulated in a consumer society. Yōkai in Japan are currently reflecting a society aware

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<sup>50</sup> Collette Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>51</sup> Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 74.

of its past but continually looking towards the future and modernity. As each generation must adapt to the traditional ideas and aspects of culture, they, in turn, create new ideas and ways to navigate society, thus bringing together tradition and modernity. The yōkai of Japan are just an ever-shifting product to be remolded, reshaped, and rebranded by consumers who have become shapeshifters themselves.

Arguably, Japanese yōkai and the supernatural have influenced both Japanese culture and the global community too. Yōkai in contemporary Japan have become products of traditional culture to be marketed around the world and continue to do so successfully. Yōkai, such as *Pokémon* or the yōkai of Shigeru Mizuki, appears to highlight and reflect several trends in current Japanese culture. These several trends are 1) Japan's current strength as a soft power, 2) Japanese society's constant shifts between tradition and modernity, and 3) the probability of what can be deemed historical and traditional culture. The use of figures associated with the macabre and uncanny therefore become indicators of culture. Moreover, yōkai become modernized to become products that produce capital, continuing the links of the past to the present.

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